
Reversible urban entities

Improving public-to-private continuity

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this paper is to call into question those typologies conventionally used in developing the post-industrial urban fabric (streets, city-blocks, slabs, etc.), often catering to urban designs based on speculative interests and completely overlooking community interests. By defining the concepts of "post-public space" and "reversible urban entities" and illustrating them with an exemplary case of Spanish residential architecture from the 1960s, we establish one possible way of tackling contemporary urban-residential projects. This alternative approach considers the relationship between residential systems and open space systems and promotes the continuity and/or alternation of scales between house and city in an effort to improve the urban quality of life for residents and external users.

KEYWORDS. Reversible urban entities, new urban typologies, collective housing and public space, in-between spaces, El Taray.

Esperanza M. Campaña Barquero* _ Gustavo Rojas Pérez**

* ** Technical University of Madrid UPM
School of Architecture ETSAM
Department of Architectural Design
Av. Juan de Herrera 4
28040 Madrid
+34 91 336 6577
esperanza.campaña@upm.es
gustavo.rojas@upm.es

1. On the dissolution of the city-home connection in the post-industrial urban fabric.

With a period of frenetic suburban expansion behind us, the consolidated urban medium seems to be entering a more introspective stage (Herrerros, 2009). This stage should certainly include a reconsideration of the central city, but rather than seeing this space as a frozen landscape, it must be viewed as a suite of opportunities for a new type of contemporary domestic life.

The object of this revision is the city left behind by the Industrial Revolution, when demographic pressures and the need to be close to the workplace led to dense construction (up and out) on the pre-existing mediaeval fabric. The single-family homes of the Gothic-mercantile period were replaced by other elements that were fundamental in the formation of the major cities in the 19th century: residential blocks and infills (Martí, 2000. 14-19). It is this metamorphosis that triggers the loss of articulation between public and domestic spaces.

The fast development of industrial cities and the introduction of new forms of transport drove a wedge between the two parts of the urban ground-figure pattern. **Previously, the street and the domestic space were one indivisible entity, since compact living conditions made public interaction inevitable and interaction on the street brought households together.** Later, in industrial cities, the layout of streets and buildings became independent from one another. The concept of infrastructure appeared and new mechanisms for managing the "urban material" were devised. This gave rise to a speculative flurry and a zeal for occupying all potentially buildable space, which turned the city into a map of blacks and whites (the street/the building/the square/the city-block). As a result, the transition spaces (the greys) between street and dwelling started to fade away.

Since then and to the present, the project of collective housing has faced the challenge of recovering the spatial gradient between what is public and what is private: the communal areas of friction, exchange and socialization. In short, everything that characterizes and gives meaning to the idea of living in a community.

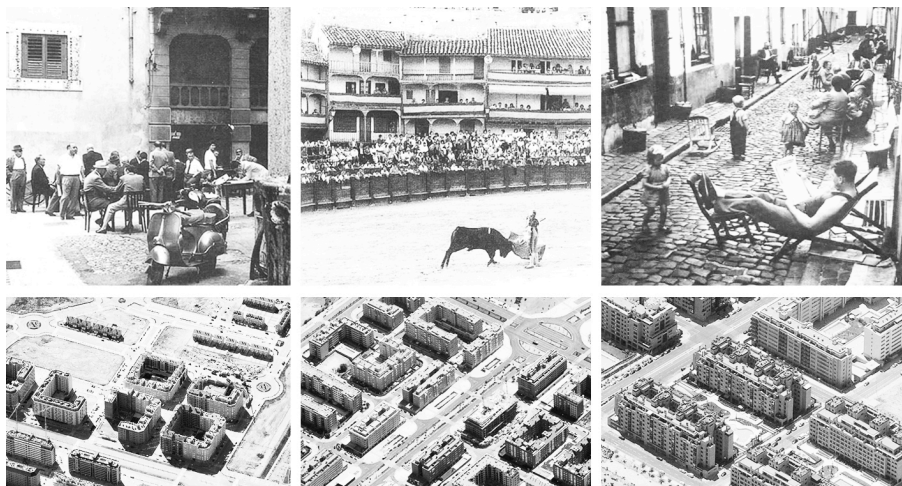


Fig.1

2. The place of everyday life in times of crisis. In search of a *post-public space*.

Given that contemporary models of urban housing have grossly overvalued the private sphere, the urban forms resulting have cancelled out any possibility of intermediate or ambiguous space between the city and the home. All available land has been turned into real estate for private consumption.

The new residential blocks and buildings going up in growing areas and the infills in consolidated areas have limited themselves to re-establishing an existing alignment with a new façade. They have missed out on an opportunity to redefine the rules of the game: to establish the relationship between domestic space, the existing urban fabric and the transition spaces. Failure to take advantage of this opportunity has led to an intensely impoverished relationship between residential buildings and the city. Ambivalent attitudes make the co-existence and simultaneity of public and private spaces –qualities that have been on the decline in contemporary cities– even less viable. At present, we live in closed and self-sufficient domestic microcosms that have progressively been equipped with greater comforts and new types of social relationships previously possible only in public spaces. This situation has ended up obliterating the ideas of neighbour and neighbourhood. Furthermore, after a century-long siege by motor vehicles, the idea of the street as a meeting place has been strongly devalued. This, together with the improvements in living conditions mentioned earlier, has brought about a loss of interest in the outside world and, consequently, public spaces are gradually becoming emptier. In the eyes of users, streets and squares are no longer safe and welcoming environments that lend themselves to social gatherings. Today's public spaces have lost their capacity to bring together and articulate everyday interests and have instead become the impersonal, multi-coloured backdrop of cities that revolve around commerce and tourism. The primary function of contemporary public spaces is to support the formal manifestation of the irreconcilable distance between urban society and political order (Delgado, 1999. 197). **The space where everyday life once took place is being turned into a political arena.**

Drawing on that perspective, this article champions the formulation of an *architecture of the city* that produces other spaces to share everyday activities and spontaneous events, as well as social gatherings and demonstrations that are not politically motivated. Collective spaces for everyday life, separated from the "official" city that carries on alongside it and which can play a communal role without the rhetoric of public representation (Solá-Morales, 1992; Theunissen 2006. 205). **A *post-public space* consisting of an open environment closely linked to domestic matters and to a small-scale urban routine left undisturbed and without media coverage¹.**

In order to establish this idea of *post-public space*, we must look beyond the traditional urban typomorphologies that are the result of a "bit by bit" design and fail to recognize the complexity of the metropolis as a whole unit. As a result of this unstructured design, the separation of *functional systems* in capitalist cities has led to a lack of continuity between domestic spaces and urban spaces belonging to the community. High building density, complex zoning regulations, and the pursuit of economic rewards have led to a total breakdown in the bonds between these systems. Community spaces have come to be defined by denial, such as an open space expropriated for private use. **Today, the residential system and the open space system continue battling it out over each square metre of city land** (Cerasi, 1990. 11-13), and the urban forms arising out of this dissociation are a true expression of the lack of permeability and exchange between the public and private domains.

3. Reversible urban entities. A lesson from El Taray.

In keeping with Cerasi's critique, the concept of *reversible urban entity* can be understood as the realization of a functional urban unit in which private life and daily social activities are intertwined. This combination is capable of provoking functional and morphological mutations in the typologies that have traditionally been used for the design of residential areas (city-blocks, slabs), as well as in the fabric that these typologies give rise to.

Reversible urban entities bring residential functions and collective spaces together under a single system, articulating the transition between home and city scales. The prominence of these two scales may vary according to the architectural design, usage pattern (predetermined or spontaneous) and management model in place. **Its primary characteristic is, therefore, its ability to belong alternatively and simultaneously to the local structure which broadens the domestic sphere and to the city's global network of open spaces.** In this way, the residential infrastructure designates a specific place for community life and, consequently, the domestic space is firmly bound to a system of public places (or pseudo-public places) of various types. Together, these form an alternative fabric that merges the interests of citizens and neighbours and which their urban quality of life is profoundly transformed.

To illustrate the concept of reversible urban entities, this paper takes from the legacy of 20th century Spanish residential architecture a project that is entirely relevant today, and from which it is possible to extract tools for critical analysis and, therefore, application constants that contribute to an understanding of the present and future of collective urban housing and their relationship with public spaces.

El Taray² was an early experiment in practical research that, already in the Spain of 1963, underscored the need to make a residential system compatible with the city's network of public spaces, resulting in a successful example of functional overlapping. El Taray is exemplary in that its organizational structure is more complex than that established by the urban layout to which it belongs. But even more noteworthy is its success in uniting two extremely dissimilar fabrics through the creation of intermediate, transitional places. While these in-between spaces improve the city, they also raise housing values, and residents view them as an asset to be shared with neighbours and the rest of the community.

On the other hand, this project constitutes a fundamental and little-explored link in the chain of housing complex projects trying to push the "street-in-the-air" concept to the limit as an alternative to a public space increasingly overrun by motor traffic that rendered the street invalid as an active, participatory environment. The concept for these projects originated with the break away from the hygienic principles of functional city organization advocated by the Athens Charter. This break was embodied in the Golden Lane project (London, 1952) that the Smithsons presented at CIAM 9 (1953) under a general theory that included the ideas of "association" and "identity".

Following the Golden Lane, the housing project on the Manzanares river (Oíza, Sierra, Romany and Milczynski, Madrid, 1953), at Park Hill Flats (Lynn, Smith and Nicklin, Sheffield, 1957-1961), Runcorn Housing (Stirling & Partner, Runcorn, 1968-76) or Byker Wall (Erskine, Newcastle 1973-78) all constituted different expressions of a new way of understanding and producing architecture that, once Le Corbusier was left behind, recovered the straightforward idea of community. In

the words of Luis Miquel, the *El Taray Neighbourhood Unit* pursued a “building-city ideal” by creating a neighbourhood space where all the interactions that could take place on the street would take place there instead. All this was achieved by means of a form of architecture that was developed through contact with people and which considered the neighbour to be a fundamental element in the design process³.

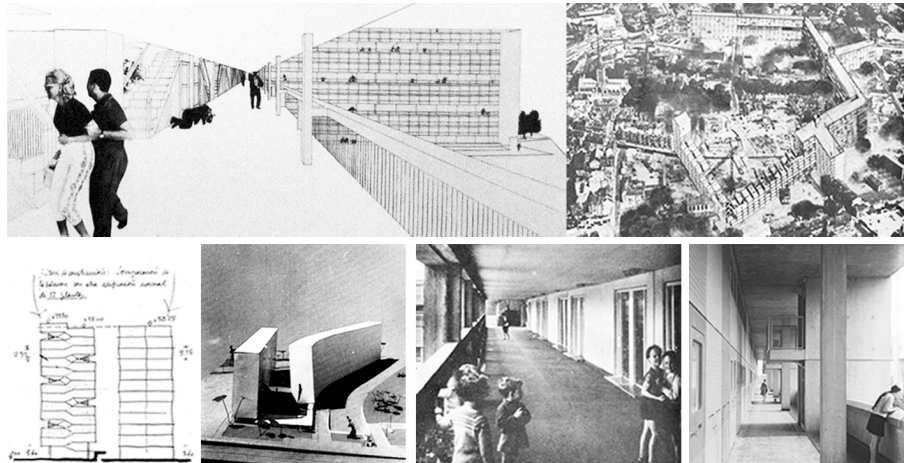


Fig.2

On a steep slope on the northern rim of Segovia’s old quarter, five prismatic structures accommodating a total of 114 housing units are arranged in a way that delineates an open garden space. This place is connected to the historic centre by an upper access road and also establishes an extension with the lower part of the city and with the landscape connecting to Taray Street. The majority of the housing units are semi-duplex, in other words, there is a half-floor difference between the two storeys, giving them a Z shaped section. Given this feature, corridors providing access to individual homes appear every two floors and, like open cracks in the structural mass, help break up the volume of the buildings. This characteristic section means that homes are entered either by going up or down a half-storey from the corridor.



Fig.3

Up to this point, this could be a generic description of any residential complex made up of isolated buildings, but **the efficient strategy of adapting them to the topography turns a mere group of buildings into a complex model of three-dimensional urbanism.** The two strictly public levels, at opposite ends of the complex and with the greatest difference in height, are located beside the two roads mentioned previously. These levels connect to the intermediate ones, which correspond to the open corridors providing access to the dwellings, and are joined together by light catwalks, staircases and bridges that form a framework of pathways that are easily accessible to both residents and pedestrians travelling from the lower part of the city to the centre and vice versa⁴. This set of pathways acts as a hinge between the citadel's compact fabric, which is made up of dense city-blocks with small patios, and the surrounding landscape. In this way, the inner oasis created by the concentric layout of the buildings is brilliantly integrated into the sequence of small adjacent plazas, giving rise to a natural continuity.

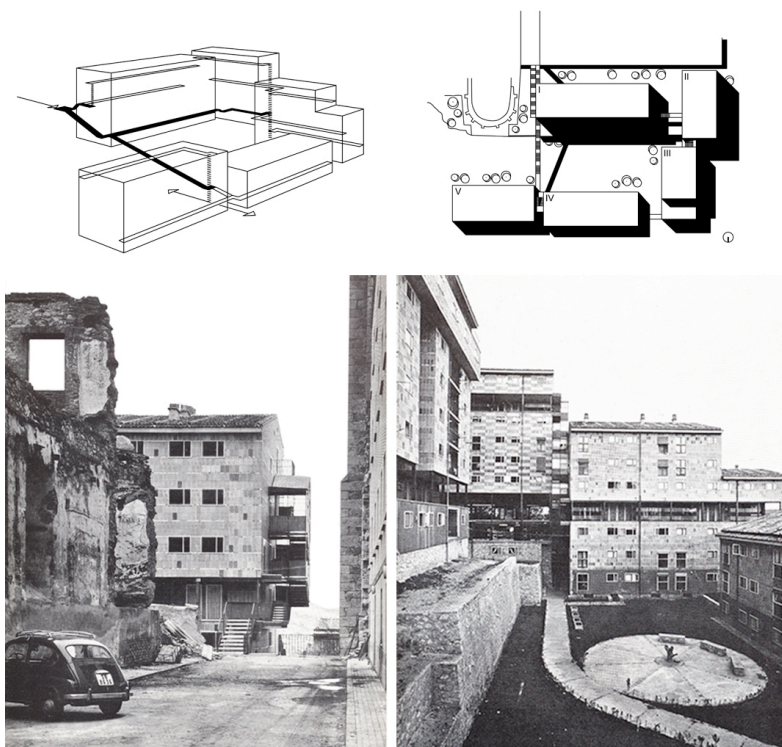


Fig.4

The mechanisms that produce this articulation are not at all forced. Anyone walking through the city centre might easily amble towards the interior and find themselves, much to their surprise, in El Taray's network of corridors and interior spaces. There are no access doors and the entry points are so subtle that they may go unnoticed. The entrance points gracefully adapt to the specific features of the perimeter to create two different architectural responses, both with a clear intention of connecting to the urban fabric. Accessing the complex from the south, from the old quarter, emphasizes the complex's condition as a scenic belvedere.

The side of building I lines up with the end of the ancient walls of the San Agustín Monastery and frees up the perspective of the street, which opens onto the horizon and also provides a full view of the complex on the hillside. The entrances from the north and the east, the lower part, are even less explicit. There are crevices between buildings II and III on the west side and buildings IV and V on the north side that are hidden by slight shifts in the structures' volumes. The north side of building II and the east side of building IV stick out somewhat interrupting the alignment of the façades, as if subtly trying to contain the flow of movement and discreetly reveal the entrance.

There are, therefore, no extra lures prompting people to enter and pass through these places. Its neutrality characterizes this architectural environment. Each element refers to the public or private domain, the urban or domestic domain, to create ambiguity without tricking users or making it impossible for them to understand the unit as a whole. In a range of ochre-tones, at a distance, the roofs, the steel structure and the façades blend in with the historic brick buildings on Segovia's northern edge. The tiling on the city's pavements extends to the catwalks and corridors. Residents keep their flowerpots on these same corridors, where they may also hang clothes up to dry or store everyday items in the enclosed space provided for each two dwellings.

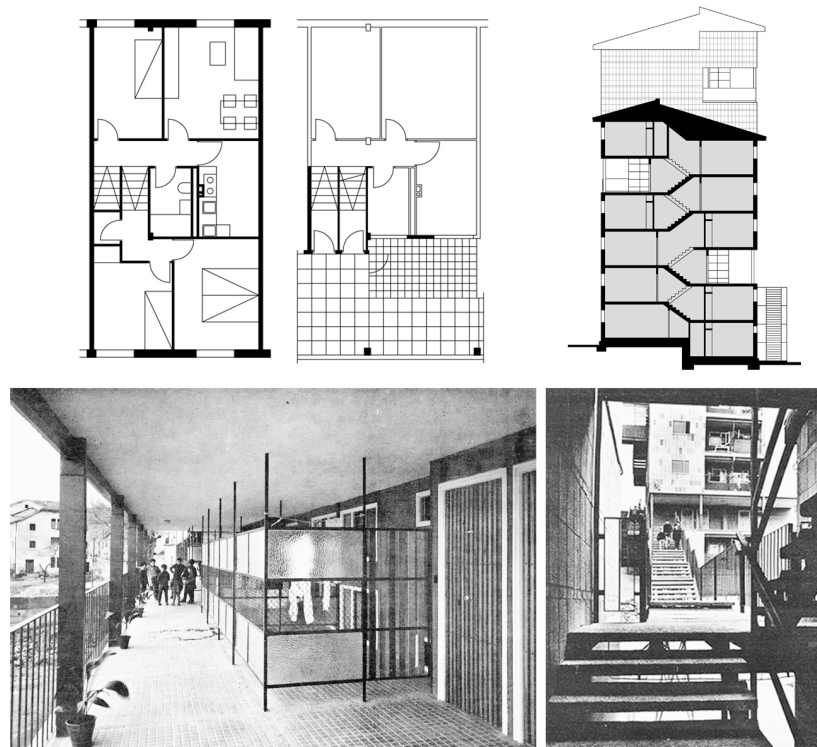


Fig.5

Similarly, as a result of its design and treatment, the inner central space has a certain indeterminate nature. Though currently altered by landscaping that fragments its spatial continuity, the space retains its original design with a few, austere elements. A pathway paved with concrete cuts lengthwise across the space. Tangential to this, a small plaza paved with the same material is furnished with three austere stone benches. This area, which belongs to the neighbours, is used freely with no apparent limits. The watchful eyes of residents from the windows of their homes and the constant footfall of neighbours along the corridors are enough to guarantee a safe place for children to play or to ward off any malevolent intruders⁵.

At the same time, no hierarchy is established between the windows that open up onto the shared space on one façade and the surrounding streets on the other. There is neither a front nor a back, as this concept is erased by the dwelling typology and its exterior expression⁶. This can be observed in the floor plan, which has a symmetrical layout with a transverse axis dividing the space into similarly sized rooms, while the central area is reserved for the bathroom and the kitchen. The bedrooms and the living rooms can open either onto one façade or the other, thereby contributing to their ambivalent and reversible nature.

As an outstanding example of a *reversible urban entity*, El Taray is open to the city and allows urban life to influence the shared space in a relatively controlled way. **Safety and protection of individual life are secondary issues because the desire to dissolve the border separating this valuable inner space from the outside world is much stronger than any obstinate desire to maintain privacy.** This project is exemplary in that, thanks to this strategy, it was able to solve an urban connectivity problem with collective housing, which made an access easement compatible with residents' everyday activities. El Taray's greatest achievement, however, is its exact measurement of the proportions and dimensions of each structure and each space so that, when assembled together, they create this characteristic central place. As it is purposely located on a level shared between the city and the homes, it is these precise measurements that ultimately allow for the immediate inversion of scales. While the interior of these working-class dwellings is austere and efficient, the place where one learns to be a citizen, where one comes into contact with others and later continues on to the public spaces in the city at large, is ample and spacious⁷. Without a doubt, the available space has been wisely invested.

4. Conclusions.

The case described here testifies to the scope of the *reversible urban entity* as a fundamental unit in the development of an urban fabric based on the idea of functional multiplicity. It also embodies the principle that asserts that research projects on collective residence should coincide with research on urban architecture and with the transformation of urban quality of life (Cerasi, 1990. 13).

In short, reversible urban entities:

- consist of a residential infrastructure that contains and/or delimits a space that can be used alternately or simultaneously by residents and by external users. While this space belongs within the private domain, it is incorporated into the city's collection of open spaces.
- are designed and built on an appropriate scale, with transitional elements that establish proper dimensional relationships between private and public spaces, while always emphasizing the whole.

- include an easement of access or attraction for non-resident beneficiaries: a public facility, a shop, an office, a shortcut to another part of the city, a fragment of a particular urban route, that makes it accessible to a diverse group of people (residents, visitors, passers-by).
- use delimiting surfaces (façades, walls, floors, ceilings, roofs) that do not specifically define the difference between interior and exterior, front and back. The materials used help to blend the different scales together.
- allow for apertures and fissures in their delimiting surfaces and volumes, thereby making the open space they contain easy to spot and identify as an extension of nearby domains.
- express their functional ambiguity by subtly combining formal elements and expressions from both the public and private environments, while maintaining a specific architectural identity.
- employ a management and maintenance system that assigns different participatory roles to the residents, the municipality and private stakeholders when necessary.
- seek to do away with the rigid, traditional relationship between plots, streets and usage patterns. Their perimeters are, by definition, ambiguous and independent of the cadastral map.
- constitute an interdependent system that is capable of generating its own category and regulations.

As a design instrument, *reversible urban entities* are based, fundamentally, on their successful integration of the scales involved, but above all they require an understanding of the collective housing project that is not centred on the objects themselves but rather on their interaction with the public space. In *reversible urban entities*, the ideas of public, communal, and private domains are called into question and are set against each other in a struggle that draws them together and pushes them apart. The shared space set aside by reversible urban entities becomes the playing field (or battle field) on which different urban groups confront one another. **The architecture of the buildings making up these complexes becomes less important than the spaces they define, which requires that greater attention be paid to the design of the empty, or negative, spaces than to the built-up spaces.** With this in mind, it seems that the central subject of urban design should focus not only on the buildings but also on the space that these envelop (Theunissen, 2006. 218).

Only by keeping in mind the shape of the open space, its correspondence with the rest of the city's public spaces, the coherence of the areas that surround it and the relationship with the buildings themselves is it possible to achieve a fitting architectural articulation that fosters the social and cultural values held in the public, communal and private domains.

¹ The concept of *post-public space* draws on the principles of what Karin Theunissen defines as the *new open space* in her article *The private-public paradox of the new open space*.

² Unidad Vecinal para la Cooperativa Pío XII. (Neighbourhood Unit for the Pope Pius XII Cooperative). Architects: Joaquín Aracil, Luis Miquel and Antonio Viloria. Segovia, 1963-65. Known as El Taray, named after the street on which it is located.

³ The architects that designed El Taray belonged to that Spanish generation of the 1950s characterized by an ideology that combined Socialism, Surrealism and Existentialism with inherited Christian roots and which made up the heterogeneous map of the adult personality for a large part of the young professionals of that time who worked to defend themselves against a perverse political situation.

⁴ Before the construction of the residential complex, Taray Street was an isolated and unpleasant route to the city centre. (*Hogar y Arquitectura*, Nº 62, 1966, p.38.)

⁵ Interestingly, the first version of the project, dated September 1962, included plans, later abandoned, for a nursery in the central space.

⁶ As opposed to the perimeter block of the enlargement, in which strongly polarized dwelling types determine the distinct interior-exterior character: the small-sized bourgeois dwelling proposed by the *Existenzminimum* is organized according to a clean/forward-facing/refined exterior façade and a dirty/rear-facing/vulgar interior façade (Panerai, 1986. 100-106).

⁷ As Carmen Espegel states in an interview on El Taray. Video film presented at the exhibition *Reflections. Corridors in collective housing* (Ministry of Housing, Madrid, 2009).

Legends

Fig.1 The loss of everyday collective-domestic spaces in the capitalist city. (Up) Workers district (Amsterdam, 19th century), Via Mazzanti (Verona, Italy), Plaza Mayor (Chinchón, Spain). (Down) Recent enlargements of Madrid.

Fig.2 (Up) Proposal for the Golden Lane (London, 1952), (down) proposal for two housing units at the Manzanares river (Madrid, 1953) and "streets-in-the-air" at Park Hill Flats (Sheffield, 1957-1961) and Runcorn housing (1968-1976).

Fig.3 Aerial view of the northern rim of Segovia with El Taray Neighbourhood Unit.

Fig.4 (Up) Layout of the buildings of the complex. (Down) Approach from the old quarter and inner space from the catwalk.

Fig.5 (Up) Dwelling type and Z shaped section. (Down) "Street-in-the-air" at the north façade of the building V and catwalk from the staircase between buildings IV and V.

Images in figures 4 and 5 are from two architectural journals of that time: *Architecture d'aujourd'hui* (nº149, 1970) and *Hogar y Arquitectura* (nº62, 1966).

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Biographies

Esperanza Campaña Barquero. Architect. Undergraduate degree from the University of Granada (School of Architecture of Granada). Master's degree in Collective Housing (MCH) from the Technical University of Madrid (UPM). PhD candidate in the Advanced Architectural Design Program (MPAA) at the same university. PhD thesis in progress: *Mutations of in-between spaces in urban collective housing of the XXth century. Interpretations and thoughts from the central city.* Researcher at GIVCO (Research Group in Collective Housing-UPM), currently participating in the R&D&i projects *Atlas of Spanish Collective Housing of the 20th Century* (2010-2012) and *Atlas of Contemporary European Collective Housing* (2012-2014), financed by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of Spain. Design Studio teaching assistant at the Department of Architectural Design of the School of Architecture of Madrid (ETSAM-UPM).

Gustavo Rojas Pérez. Architect. Undergraduate degree from the University of Granada (School of Architecture of Granada). Master's degree in Collective Housing (MCH) from the Technical University of Madrid (UPM). PhD candidate in the Advanced Architectural Design Program (MPAA) at the same university. PhD thesis in progress: *The temporary dwelling. Spatial and temporal variations in specialized models of collective housing.* Researcher at GIVCO (Research Group in Collective Housing-UPM), currently participating in the R&D&i projects *Atlas of Spanish Collective Housing of the 20th Century* (2010-2012) and *Atlas of Contemporary European Collective Housing* (2012-2014), financed by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness of Spain. Design Studio teaching assistant at the Department of Architectural Design of the School of Architecture of Madrid (ETSAM-UPM).